

Maxwell's hands were starting to tremble. The rock surface was skinning the tips of his fingers. He was not going to be able to hold on much longer and there were things in the ocean. Inasmuch as he was still able to feel, he was afraid. Inasmuch as his life was worth fearing for.

Someone was coming, his light, creeping footsteps drawing nearer along the rock surface. "Pal," Maxwell said. He did not say anything more. Under the circumstances, asking for help was a bit gauche.

Wilson peered over the edge. He looked a little out of focus around the eyes, as usual; he was fogged over and sluggish. The fog was clearing now. The predicament in which Maxwell had found himself was sinking in. A light was dawning in those eyes. "If you should decide to pull me up," said Maxwell, "I'll make it worth your while."

Wilson said nothing. He slipped an axe out of his backpack and rolled the handle between his hands

"Now come on. Is that strictly necessary? I mean really," Maxwell said. "If you want to be cruel you might at least do the proper thing and use the heel of your shoe, or-" He was slipping already when the blade came down. But it still hit its target.

Maxwell hissed in air between his teeth. The surroundings were dimly lit by the embers of the fire. Maxwell was laid out flat on his back on a layer of straw, barely better than plain old ground. Above him were stars that winked in and out in a grotesque approximation of twinkling- stars that changed their positions as they chose.

He turned his head. Wilson was curled up on his own mat a few feet away. His fingers twitched at random and his eyes moved rapidly behind their lids. His breathing was ragged and shaky, almost sobbing. In waking life he spoke rarely and flinched at sudden movements.

If only Maxwell could see into the dark spaces locked up in his skull. What was he thinking? Was he truly abject, or was he capable of the thing he'd done in Maxwell's dream?

Did it matter? When would he ever get the opportunity to do so?

Wilson had something clutched in his arms, a large rabbit tail. A comfort object. How adorable.

Maxwell deftly stole it and chucked it into the embers.

Wilson moaned in his sleep and hugged himself. He didn't seem to be faking.

Maxwell folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the obscene things that were not stars. Charlie was out there watching him in the darkness. Sometimes, every once in a while, he wondered if she approved of what he was doing. Or would approve if she was still herself.

It didn't matter. He rolled onto his side and tried to go back to sleep. It was difficult with the sound of Wilson's frightened breathing in his ear.

Perhaps his breathing should be... stopped.